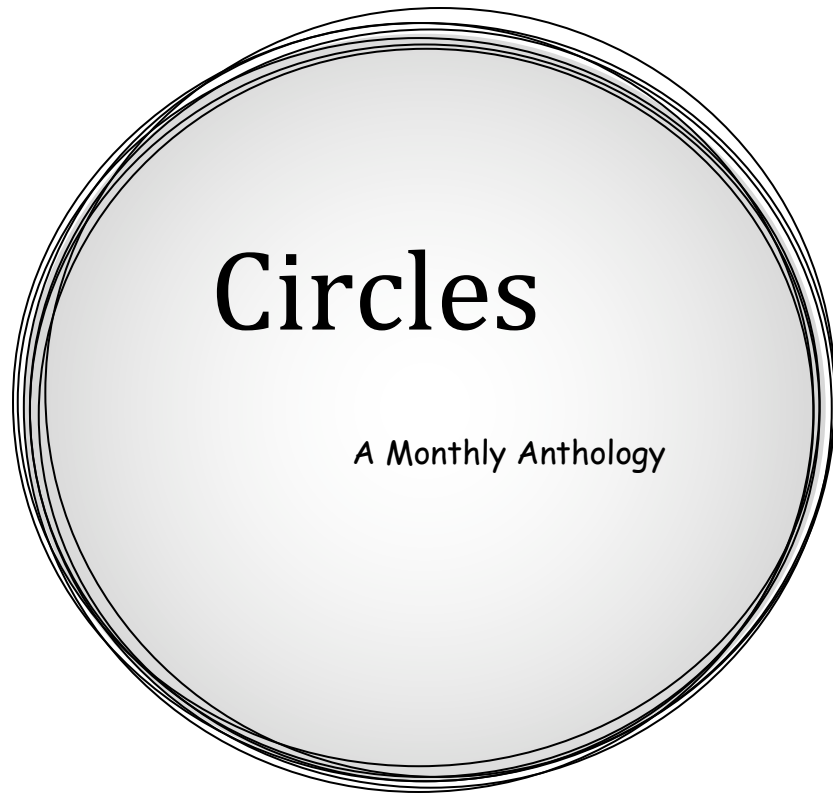




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Spring

Spring is upon us! At least it is in the temperate zones that dominate poetry in English. A close companion whenever I teach seasonal poetry is an old, used copy of Harold Bloom and John Hollander's out-of-print *The Wind and the Rain: An Anthology of Poems for Young People*. (My copy has only one marking in it, "Barth," in blue marker, which I like to pretend is John Barth, though he would've been 31. He just recently died!) We all know that Spring is associated, firstly, with rebirth and renewal, youth and falling in love. Here's how Bloom and Hollander open their description of their book's themes:

This book begins with the movement of wind and rain, and with the reminder that the seasons and their weather exist also in the mind of man. Songs of wind and rain are followed by the message of the March wind to earth and man alike, bidding them rise again in the year's rebirth. The Spring, with its buds and songs, sees also the return of the great god Pan, the universal spirit of fresh woodland life. The poems of Spring salute Diana, the goddess of birth and of women, the protectress of the young, whether animal or human. Spring brings movement upon the roads; pedlars, pilgrims, highwaymen, Gy-[er, Roma]. The natural movement of courtship is sung as well; the seeds of love are celebrated, until the scent of roses takes us into summer, and the poetry of earth is heard in its full voice.

This month's issue is a hymnal of Spring, opening with Chaucer's famous one to *The Canterbury Tales*, with our most entertaining pilgrims (to which I've added a paraphrase, since unlike Spenser's archaic idiom, he wasn't just making up its foreignness). There is much about love and flowers and water, but I have also noticed that much of our best Spring writing has always been mixed with darker emotions. You might expect that of a literary tradition that has grown old, but anyone old enough to put pen to paper has probably already experienced enough seasonal and emotional ebbs and flows, silverlinings and betrayals to know what comes around.

My favorite bit this month is Mallarmé's story of a priest's unmediated contact with Nature—though to be sure, he still wore his robe as he had his way with the grass! There's also, for what it's worth, a lot of juice in this issue.

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote,
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye,
That slepen al the night with open ye—
So priketh hem Nature in hir corages—
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes;
And specially, from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The holy blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke

When sweet April showers
pierce dry March to the root,
and bathe every plant in such moisture
in virtue of which engenders the flower;
when, too, the Western Zephyr with sweet breath
inspires in every wood and heath
the tender sprouts, and the young sun
has run halfway through the sign of Aries,
and small birds make melody,
all night, open-eyed without sleep—
Nature so spurs them in their hearts—
folk long to go on pilgrimages,
and palmers seek foreign shores
for far-off shrines, known in sundry lands;
especially Canterbury,
because I'm English,
when in need of help and are sick.

— Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, “The General Prologue”



Spring

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring –
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush
Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;
The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy?
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden. – Have, get, before it cloy,

Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,
Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

— Gerard Manley Hopkins

Hymn

To Spring

O thou with dewy locks, who lookest down
Through the clear windows of the morning, turn
Thine angel eyes upon our western isle,
Which in full choir hails thy approach, O Spring!

The hills tell each other, and the listening
Valleys hear; all our longing eyes are turned
Up to thy bright pavilions: issue forth,
And let thy holy feet visit our clime.

Come o'er the eastern hills, and let our winds
Kiss thy perfumed garments; let us taste
Thy morn and evening breath; scatter thy pearls
Upon our love-sick land that mourns for thee.

O deck her forth with thy fair fingers; pour
Thy soft kisses on her bosom; and put
Thy golden crown upon her languished head,
Whose modest tresses were bound up for thee.

— Blake



“*The Fruits of America*. By C. M. Hovey. Boston: C. C. Little. Vol. I, No. 1. The object of this new work is to give colored drawings and a letter press description of all the choicest varieties of fruits cultivated in the United States. Pomona, who never in her dreams conceived the flavor of a Beurré D’Aremberg, Leon le Clerc, would find her mouth water could she but gaze on one of the luscious pears that is printed to the very juice in this number. The accomplished editor has done well, by the way, to open his work with the fruit of the pear tree; for the pear—intrinsically so worthy a fruit—is entitled to additional notice, from being about the oldest orchard settler we have among us. We have seen trees in Michigan, planted there by the French two hundred years ago; and the well known pear tree of Governor Stuyvesant, in this city, is very nearly as old. The apple trees of the country are all mere parvenues compared with these; and the Baldwin apple of which we have a highly colored engraving in the present number, has a bloated, over ruddy, obtrusive look, as if it were conscious of sudden-got importance, and trying to outface the gracefully pendent pears amid which it struts upon our notice. The amateur cultivator, however, will not object to fruits thus taking airs upon themselves; and even if the strong marks of characteristic portraiture in these fine drawings are lost upon him, will welcome the work as promising efficient aid in the extension of pomological science.” — unsigned (Duyckinck?), *The Literary World*, June 1847

Benediction: A Reading from the Book of Millay

From *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems*:

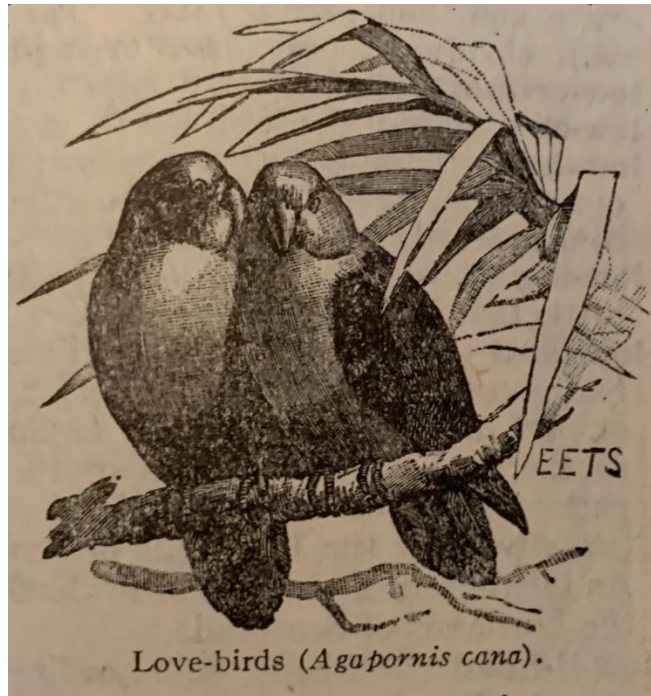
What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.
Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

Lads, perhaps mere boys, reduced to their parts, their selves fading into insubstantial causes of quiet melancholy. They sang beautiful songs, flocking to the tree when seasonable. I've always wondered about casting the woman as an unmovable tree, lacking the autonomy the birds have. But, on the other hand, the tree will outlast all of them.

Contrary to first appearances, I speculate that we read this as a spring poem. The closing six lines of the Millay's Petrarchan sonnet mark it off as a winter poem, casting an eye—what kind of eye?—back over the speaker's love life. And if you're a student, looking for contextual clues to hang your hat on, you might look to the publication date as your anthology lists it—except that many anthologies list the "What lips" date as 1941, when her *Collected Sonnets* was published. Millay, born in 1892, would've been in her late forties, which still makes the poem a kind of projection into the future—it only *feels* like life is over at that age. But the remarkable thing about the poem that underscores the projection is that Millay published it in *Vanity Fair* in 1920, her late *twenties*, the prime of one's life. And so, I speculate, the rain pelting her window are those great APRIL SHOWERS, which after all would mirror her actual age quite nicely—a poem about a woman, filing through so many suitors she doesn't remember their names, but more or less okay about it. So much so that she imagines her life being over, and having fondness for those times in the spring.

and where, and why, I have forgotten

‘It says *summer*’—yeah, well, when you’re falling in love, it feels like summer, which works in the present and thinks not of the future, but then a cold wind blows in snow suddenly, before melting it all away the next day. Perhaps that’s the trick of spring and fall—they lean in both directions, making us believe winter or summer is here. The wisdom of the poem is accepting oneself in all seasons.



March 8. The wind shifts from northeast and east to northwest and south, and every icicle which has tinkled on the meadow grass so long trickles down its stem and seeks its water level unerringly with a million comrades. In the ponds the ice cracks with a busy and grating hoarsely and crashing its way along, which was so lately a firm field for the woodman’s team and the fox, sometimes with the tracks of the skaters still fresh upon it, and the holes cut for pickerel. Town committees inspect the bridges and causeways, as if by mere eye-force to intercede with the ice and save the treasury.

In the brooks the slight grating sound of small cakes of ice, floating with various speed, is full of content and promise, and where the water gurgles under a natural bridge, you may hear these hasty rafts hold conversation in an undertone. Every rill is a channel for the juices of the

meadow. Last year's grasses and flower-stalks have been steeped in rain and snow, and now the brooks flow with meadow tea, — thoroughwort, mint, flagroot, and pennyroyal, all at one draught.

In the ponds the sun makes incroachments around the edges first, as ice melts in a kettle on the fire, darting his rays through this crevice, and preparing the deep water to act simultaneously on the under side.

Two years and twenty now have flown;
Their meanness time away has flung;
These limbs to man's estate have grown,
But cannot claim a manly tongue.

Amidst such boundless wealth without
I only still am poor within;
The birds have sun their summer out,
But still my spring does not begin.

In vain I see the morning rise,
In vain observe the western blaze,
Who idly look to other skies,
Expecting life by other ways.

The sparrow sings at earliest dawn,
Building her nest without delay;
All things are ripe to hear her song,
And now arrives the perfect day.

Shall I then wait the autumn wind,
Compelled to seek a milder ray,
And leave no empty nest behind,
No wood still echoing to my lay?

——— Thoreau's journal, 1840



Daffodils are associated with *regard*, *chivalry*, and *deceitful hope* in various “language of flowers” books from the 19th century. Others found in this issue (from Lucy Hooper's *Lady's Book of Flowers and Poetry*): mint=virtue; pennyroyal=flee away; grass=submission; sycamore=woodland beauty; daisy=innocence; violet=modesty; lilac=forsaken; rose=genteel, pretty; lily=return of happiness; crocus=cheerfulness; hepatica=confidence; hawthorn=hope; barberry=sourness; primrose=early youth; myrtle=love; apple-tree blossom=fame speaks him great and good; periwinkle=pleasures of memory (duh, Wordsworth).

A Bevy of Bacon

[L]earned, but idle and indolent, men have received some mere reports of experience, traditions as it were of dreams, as establishing or confirming their philosophy, and have not hesitated to allow them the weight of legitimate evidence. So that a system has been pursued in philosophy with regard to experience resembling that of a kingdom or state which would direct its councils and affairs according to the gossip of city and street politicians, instead of the letters and reports of ambassadors and messengers worthy of credit. . . . [F]or a natural history compiled on its own account, and one collected for the mind's information as a foundation for philosophy, are two different things. . . . as in ordinary life every person's disposition, and the concealed feelings of the mind and passions are most drawn out when they are disturbed, — so the secrets of nature betray themselves more readily when tormented by art than when left to their own course. [*Novum Organum*, Aphorism 98, trans. Shaw and Devy]

Often
translated
"torture"

For the business in this matter is no more than to hound nature in her willful wanderings; that so afterward you may be able at your pleasure, to lead or force her to the same place and postures again. [*Advancement of Learning*, Bk 2, trans. Watts, modified]

Yikes!

Erichthonius, or Imposture

The poets feign that Vulcan attempted the chastity of Minerva, and impatient of refusal, had recourse to force; the consequence of which was the birth of Erichthonius, whose body from the middle upwards was comely and well-proportioned, but his thighs and legs small, shrunk, and deformed, like an eel. Conscious of this defect, he became the inventor of chariots, so as to show the graceful, but conceal the deformed part of his body,

Explanation.—This strange fable seems to carry this meaning. Art is here represented under the person Vulcan, by reason of the various uses it makes of fire; and nature under the person of Minerva, by reason of the industry employed in her works. Art, therefore, whenever it offers violence to nature, in order to conquer, subdue, and bend her to its purpose, by tortures and force of all kinds, seldom obtains the end proposed; yet upon great struggle and application, there proceed certain imperfect births, or lame abortive works, specious in appearance, but weak and unstable in use; which are, nevertheless, with great pomp and deceitful appearances, triumphantly carried about, and shown, by impostors. A procedure very familiar, and remarkable in chemical productions, and new mechanical inventions; especially when the inventors rather hug their errors than improve upon them, and go on struggling with nature, not seducing her. [*Wisdom of the Ancients*, Shaw and Devy, modified]

Oh boy

Hymns

O sweet spontaneous
earth how often have
the
doting

fingers of
prurient philosophers pinched
and
poked

thee
, has the naughty thumb
of science prodded
thy

beauty . how
often have religions taken
thee upon their scraggy knees
squeezing and

buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive
gods
(but
true

to the incomparable
couch of death thy
rhythmic
lover

thou answerest

them only with

spring)

— e. e. cummings



'I'm dying.' Well, *you* aren't, your body is. That, at least, is the argument of the *Phaedo* and *The Little Prince*.

A Man of the Cloth

Springtime induces organisms to commit acts which, in any other season, would be foreign to them, and many natural history treatises are full of descriptions of this phenomenon in animals. How much more interesting it is, then, to gather materials about the climatic transformations observable in individuals made for spirituality! Barely out of the irony of winter, I myself remain in an equivocal state unless it is replaced by some absolute or naïve naturalism, able to find pleasure in the gap between two blades of grass. Since nothing in the present case could profit the crowd, I retire, in order to meditate on it, under one of those shade trees I noticed yesterday around the town. It is precisely at the heart of their quite ordinary shadowy mystery that I will show you a striking and graspable example of such springtime inspirations.

Great was my surprise when, earlier today, in a deserted spot in the Bois de Boulogne, walking soundlessly through the woods, I saw, through the thousand interstices of the screen of saplings good for concealing nothing, convulsed in regular beats, animated from his tricornered hat to his silver-buckled shoes, a cleric, who, in absence of any witnesses, was giving himself to the inviting grass. Far be it from me (and far also, one hopes, from any providential plan) to make my presence felt: I felt guilty like someone falsely scandalized seizing a pebble in the pathway, I hoped that my smile, however complicitous, would not redden the face concealed behind the two hands of the poor man, any more than the redness already brought on by his solitary exercise! My foot quick, since it was necessary that my presence not cause any distraction, needed agility: and strength to resist the temptation of a backward glance; I had to content myself with imagining the almost diabolical continuation of his writhing, right, left, and front, that produced that chaste frenzy. Everything, whether rubbing himself or flinging out parts of his body, whether rolling or sliding, brought satisfaction: and stopping short, ignoring the tickling of some tall stems against his dark ankles, in that special robe worn to signify that one is all in all to oneself, even one's own wife, was impossible. O solitude and cold, silence dispersed in the underbrush, you heard, perceived by senses less subtle than anxious, the muffled pounding of cloth, as if the night hiding in its creases were shaken out, finally freed! And the muffled banging of the rejuvenated skeleton against the earth imparted new life; the disciples didn't even have to look at you. Intoxicated, it was enough to seek in oneself the cause of a pleasure or duty, not at all explained by the ecclesiastic's return, across the lawn, to the familiar seminar pranks. The warm verdant breath of spring eventually

dilated the immutable texts inscribed in his flesh, and he emboldened by the pleasant arousal of his sterile thinking, had come to recognize, through contact with Nature—unmediated, sharp, violent, positive, stripped of all intellectual curiosity—the general well-being. And, candidly, far from the obedience and constraint of his occupation—the canons, the prohibitions, and the censures—he rolled around, in the beatitude of his native simplicity, happier than a mule. The moment the goal of his walk was finished, he stood up abruptly like a waterspout, not without brushing off the pistils and juices that clung to his person, and in order to go back unnoticed into his congregation and the habits of the ministry; it was necessary for the hero of my thought—I’m trying not to deny anything here—I have the right not to think about it. Doesn’t my discretion about enjoyment as it first appeared have as its recompense to fix forever that passer-by’s fantasy, completing it as I wish? The image stamped with the mysterious seal of modernity, at once baroque and beautiful?

——— Mallarmé, trans. Barabara Johnson



From the Library: Reviews of Old, But Hot Off the Shelf
Anne Carson’s Eros the Bittersweet

1. Anne Carson is a working poet and scholar of Ancient Greek literature, one of those rare talents like John Hollander whose abilities as both writer and scholar are high, distinct, and then finally blended in their work in both fields. I had a professor in grad school who liked to say that poet-critics like Hollander wrote in a mode that skipped the conclusion. He would use his hand to take off in an arched parabola, stopping at the top as if cupping the apex, with fingers just over the other side of it, saying something like, “They start making an argument, but just as they reach the other side of it, it’s like they stop and go, ‘Isn’t that interesting?’ and move on.” This is a wonderful mode for the exploration of large, observed patterns, allowing you to throw out hypotheses for others to test in their own experience. When the data are such large sets of text—because these are voracious readers, we are talking about—proving one’s point is beside it: the real proof must be provided by each reader testing the hypothesis in their own reading, by having their reading enhanced by the argument.

Carson’s book works in something like this way, though her arcs are more like loops. The chapters are small and focused, have nice little landings that lead to the next, but also leave little threads sticking out that are woven

in later, creating a binding in her argument that is subtle and unforced. The book should have been subtitled, as Sandra Newman does in the introduction to the 2022 edition, “an Essay,” because it is very much in that old mode of a long experiment of thought. However, most in that mode are just huge, long, unbroken stretches of writing that are easy to get lost in (which I imagine is what happened to these writers, as most wrote them long before computers made editing easier). Carson’s mode of a proliferation of small chapters I find clarify the long argument, even as the mode doesn’t really require an argument at all.

Eros, Newman tells us, is based on Carson’s doctoral thesis in classics, which explains the wonderful scholarship, deftly deployed. Newman also says it was published to mixed reviews from academics, which I also don’t find surprising since you wouldn’t say that it is itself a piece of scholarship, but rather uses scholarship brilliantly. And that is after all what scholarship should be used for—to light up and illuminate the world around us and our experience of it.

Carson’s argument about love is fairly intuitive, but that is because we’ve been conditioned by the very literary traditions she explores. The book is a kind of archaeology in this way, unearthing the first fruits of writers exploring what it is like to be in love. This makes her book one of the earliest in a field now being developed as the *history of emotions*, though its pioneer might be Walter J. Ong. What both Ong and Carson recognized is the entwinement of our experience of the world with technological development, especially for both the technology of writing.

2. As Carson’s title indicates, she lifts off from Sappho’s famous fragment that coins the word we now know as “bittersweet”:

Ἔρος δαῦτέ μ’ ὁ λυσιμέλης δόνει
γλυκύπικρον ἰμάχανον ὄρπετον,

Lo! Love the looser of limbs stirs me, that creature irresistible, bitter-sweet

Eros once again limb-loosener whirls me
sweetbitter, impossible to fight off, creature stealing up

Eros the melter of limbs (now again) stirs me—
sweetbitter unmanageable creature who steals in

The first translation is the Loeb, giving us the standard English translation of the first word in the second line of the Greek, *glukupikron*. (Before moving on, are not “limb-loosener” and “melter of limbs” the most accurate and beautiful descriptions of the feeling?) The second two are Carson’s own translations (the second from her collection of translations of Sappho, *If Not, Winter*), and as she points out, the original Greek is in the reverse order of our standard translation. Carson interprets this, not as a sequence, like the chronology of a love affair, but as the obvious followed by surprising elements of “the instant of desire. One moment staggers under pressure of eros; one mental state splits.” “Eros moves or creeps upon its victim from somewhere outside her: *orpeton* [the last word of the second line]. No battle avails to fight off that advance: *amachanon* [the middle word]. Desire, then, is neither inhabitant nor ally of the desirer. Foreign to her will, it forces itself irresistibly upon her from without. Eros is an enemy. Its bitterness must be the taste of enmity. That would be hate.”

3. The title of Carson’s doctoral thesis was *Odi et Amo Ergo Sum*, “I hate and love, therefore I am.” Indeed, Carson has a Cartesian project in mind—it is not *knowing* that produces our awareness of the solidity of our self as a self, but *feeling*, and precisely because irresistibility of feeling *threatens* that solidity. *Eros* means *desire*, indicating an absence, and so erotic love wants something it lacks. But this, then, poses a “dilemma in eros” since “it is by definition impossible for [the lover] to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting.” “All human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles, love and hate its motive energies.” Here are two disparate passages where Carson develops this theme:

[W]here eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—loved, beloved, and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros. When the circuit-points connect, perception leaps. And something becomes visible, on the triangular path where volts are moving, that would not be visible without the three-part structure. The difference between what is and what could be is visible.

Infants begin to see by noticing the edges of things. How do they know an

“[A]ny number of impressions, from any number of sensory sources, falling simultaneously on a mind WHICH HAS NOT YET EXPERIENCED THEM SEPARATELY, will fuse into a single undivided object for that mind. The law is that all things fuse that can fuse, and nothing separates except what must. What makes impressions separate we have to study in this chapter. Although they separate easier if they come in through distinct nerves, yet distinct nerves are not an unconditional ground of their discrimination, as we shall presently see. The baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion.” — William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1

edge is an edge? By passionately wanting it not to be. The experience of eros as lack alerts a person to the boundaries of himself, of other people, of things in general. It is the edge separating my tongue from the taste for which it longs that teaches me what an edge is. Like Sappho's adjective *glukupikron*, the moment of desire is one that defies proper edge, being a compound of opposites forced together at pressure. Pleasure and pain at once register upon the lover, inasmuch as the desirability of the love object derives, in part, from its lack. To whom is it lacking? To the lover. If we follow the trajectory of eros we consistently find it tracing out this same route: it moves out from the lover toward the beloved, then ricochets

back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed before. Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole.

4. These edges and holes bring Carson to one of her most fruitful speculations about love, as she connects eros to the development of literacy in the ancient world. She doesn't draw on Ong (as his work was not on the Greeks), but he uses a term in *The Presence of the Word* that effectively captures the premise of Carson's view of experience: the sensorium. That our modes of communication change our experience of the world in part because they lay emphasis on different *senses* is something we owe to the work of Millman Parry, Ong, Eric Havelock, and the so-called Toronto School, of which Marshall McLuhan is the most famous. Here's a cento of some good bits:

Change of self is loss of self to [the Greek lyric] poets. Their metaphors for the experience are metaphors of war, disease and bodily dissolution. These metaphors assume a dynamic of assault and resistance. Extreme sensual tension between the self and its environment is the poets' focus, and a particular image of that tension predominates. In Greek lyric poetry, eros is an experience of melting.

In experiencing and articulating the melting threat of eros, the Greek poets are presumably also learning something about their own bounded selves through the effort to resist dissolution of those bounds in erotic emotion. The physiology that they posit for the erotic experience is one which assumes eros to be hostile in intention and detrimental in effect. Alongside melting we might cite metaphors of piercing, crushing, bridling, roasting, stinging, biting, grating, cropping, poisoning, singeing and grinding to power, all of which are used of eros by the poets, giving a cumulative impression of intense concern for the

integrity and control of one's own body. The lover learns as he loses it to value the bounded entity of himself.

The archaic age was in general a time of change, unrest and reordering. In politics with the rise of the *polis*, in economics with the invention of coinage, in poets with the study by lyric poets of precise moments in personal life, and in communications technology with the introduction of the Phoenician alphabet to Greece, this period may be seen as one of contraction and focus: contraction of large structures into smaller units, focus upon definition of those units.

An individual who lives in an oral culture uses his senses differently than one who lives in a literate culture, and with that different sensual deployment comes a different way of conceiving his own relations with his environment, a different conception of his body and a different conception of his self. The difference revolves around the physiological and psychological phenomenon of individual self-control. Self-control is minimally stressed in an oral milieu where most of the data important for survival and understanding are channelled into the individual through the open conduits of his senses, particularly his sense of sound, in a continuous interaction linking him with the world outside him. Complete openness to the environment is a condition of optimum awareness and alertness for such a person, and a continual fluent interchange of sensual impressions and responses between the environment and himself is the proper condition of his physical and mental life. To close his senses off from the outside world would be counterproductive to life and to thought.

When people begin to learn reading and writing, a different scenario develops. Reading and writing require focusing the mental attention upon a text by means of the visual sense. As an individual reads and writes he gradually learns to close or inhibit the input of his senses, to inhibit or control the responses of his body, so as to train energy and thought upon the written words. He resists the environment outside him by distinguishing and controlling the one inside him. This constitutes at first a laborious and painful effort for the individual, psychologists and sociologists tell us. In making the effort he becomes aware of the interior self as an entity separable from the environment and its input, controllable by his own mental action. The recognition that such controlling action is possible, and perhaps necessary, marks an important stage in ontogenetic as in phylogenetic development, a stage at which the individual personality gathers itself to resist disintegration.

5. John Dewey teaches that philosophy's quest for certainty begins out of a more primal quest for control. Everything goes wrong, for Dewey, when philosophers cease trying to have an effect on their environment, on life, and instead make the life of mind an escape from the dangerous world around. What I like about Carson's *Eros* is how it shows how we might reintegrate poetry and literature back into a grander story about our intellectual and emotional development, our phylogenetic evolution. Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* is still useful in showing how the development of literacy helped to create the particular problems of Greek philosophy, and

Carson's *Eros* shows the same for Greek lyric poetry. It's much more than this, of course, but it's nice that it does this, too.



The Spring

Now that the winter's gone, the earth has lost
Her snow-white robes; and now no more the frost
Candies the grass, or casts an icy cream
Upon the silver lake or crystal stream:
But the warm sun thaws the benumbed earth,
And makes it tender; gives a sacred birth
To the dead swallow; wakes in hollow tree
The drowsy cuckoo and the humblebee.
Now do a choir of chirping minstrels bring
In triumph to the world, the youthful spring.
The valleys, hills, and woods in rich array
Welcome the coming of the longed-for May.
Now all things smile; only my love doth lour;
Nor hath the scalding noonday sun the power
To melt that marble ice, which still doth hold
Her heart congealed, and makes her pity cold.
The ox, which lately did for shelter fly
Into the stall, doth now securely lie
In open fields; and love no more is made
By the fireside; but in the cooler shade
Amyntas now doth with his Chloris sleep
Under a sycamore, and all things keep
Time with the season; only she doth carry
June in her eyes, in her heart January.

— Thomas Carew



“You have doubtless, often admired the budding and flowering trees, as they are decked by the beautiful spring, after the cold and nakedness of winter. You have seen how their verdure and shade, add charms to the landscape, or have walked through the forest, delighted with its loftiness and majesty. Have you ever reflected on the goodness of the Creator, in forming such a variety of trees, and fitting them to different climates, and to the wants of man?” — Lydia Howard Sigourney, *The Boy's Reading-book: In Prose and Poetry, for Schools*, 1839

Hymn

When daisies pied and violets blue
And lady-smocks, all silver-white
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue
Do paint the meadows with delight,
The cuckoo then on every tree
Mocks married men, for thus sings he:
Cuckoo!
Cuckoo, cuckoo! — O word of fear,
Unpleasing to a married ear!

When shepherds pipe on oaten straws,
And merry larks are ploughmen's clocks,
When turtles tread, and rooks and daws,
And maidens bleach their summer smocks,
The cuckoo then on every tree
Mocks married men, for thus sings he,
Cuckoo!
Cuckoo, cuckoo! — O word of fear,
Unpleasing to a married ear!

— Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, Act 5, Scene 2



They're burning books!

Hymn

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the gardens
After the agony in stony places
The shouting and the crying
Prison and palace and reverberation
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one.
Only a cock stood on the rooftree
Co co rico co co rico
In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust
Bringing rain

— Eliot, *The Wasteland*, lines 1-7,
19-30, 322-30, 385-94

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings,
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,
With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
A sprig with its flower I break.

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the
ground, spotting the gray debris,
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass,
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-
brown fields uprisen,
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

Here, coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac.

(Nor for you, for one alone,
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,
For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O sane and sacred
death.

All over bouquets of roses,
O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you and the coffins all of you O death.)

— Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard
Bloom'd,” sec. 1, 3, 5, 7 (mostly)

Sermon: Fresh

They say you have to keep a relationship *fresh*. Doing something new is thus a magical trick, *breathing life*, maybe into it, to avoid decay. *Surprise*, though, seems nearer the mark, a keyword for Emerson's sense of divinity. We sometimes speak of *keeping things lively*, which follows in this.

I think of Socrates, and a description of him by the philosopher Alexander Nehamas. Nehamas asserts that Socrates, the character, in Plato's early dialogues is a magnetic literary representation, a great aesthetic achievement. Some—not all, granted—are attracted to Socrates, Nehamas posits, because of his irony towards us, which makes him *feel more real* than other representations of Socrates (in Xenophon or Aristophanes, say). *The opacity makes him feel real*.

I like that insight—a person *feels real* because we can't see into their heads. That's what surprise signifies and why love *feels real and refreshed* by these moments.

We cannot see into our beloved. I doubt we can ever become transparent to ourselves, much less another. The insight of the Romantics, especially the Americans, was that we, each of us individually, are a poem and great poems, founded on metaphor and trope, are opaque, in need of reading. Beloved poems I return to over and over—they become familiar, and it is comforting to feel the lines, running eyes and hands over them, seeing where they go even if we kind of know where they go. But sometimes they surprise us, opening hidden paths between us, and exploring our beloved, without fear or guile, letting the opaque slide over us and through us, is electrifying and can renew us.



Spring

To what purpose, April, do you return again?
Beauty is not enough.
You can no longer quiet me with the redness
Of little leaves opening stickily.
I know what I know.
The sun is hot on my neck as I observe
The spikes of the crocus.
The smell of the earth is good.
It is apparent that there is no death.

But what does that signify?
Not only under ground are the brains of men
Eaten by maggots.
Life in itself
Is nothing.
An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs.
It is not enough that yearly, down this hill,
April
Comes like an idiot, babbling and strewing flowers.

— Millay



Is not thilke the mery moneth of May,
When love lads masken in fresh aray?
How falles it then, we no merrier bene,
Ylike as others, girt in gawdy greene?
Our bloncket liveryes bene all to sadde,
For thilke same season, when all is ycladd
With pleasaunce: the grownd with grasse, the Woods
With greene leaves, the bushes with bloosming Buds.
Youghthes folke now flocken in every where,
To gather may buskets and smelling brere:
And home they hasten the postes to dight,
And all the Kirke pillours eare day light,
With Hawthorne buds, and swete Eglantine,
And girlonds of roses and Sopps in wine.
Such merimake holy Saints doth queme,
But we here sytten as drownd in a dreme.

— Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender*



Buds and Bird-Voices

Balmy Spring—weeks later than we expected and months later than we longed for her—comes at last to revive the moss on the roof and walls of our old mansion. She peeps brightly into my study window, inviting me to throw it open and create a summer atmosphere by the intermixture of her genial

breath with the black and cheerless comfort of the stove. As the casement ascends, forth into infinite space fly the innumerable forms of thought or fancy that have kept me company in the retirement of this little chamber during the sluggish lapse of wintry weather; visions, gay, grotesque, and sad; pictures of real life, tinted with Nature's homely gray and russet; scenes in dreamland bedizened with rainbow-hues which faded before they were well laid on;—all these may vanish now, and leave me to mould a fresh existence out of sunshine. Brooding meditation may flap her dusky wings and take her owl-like flight, blinking amid the cheerfulness of noontide. Such companions befit the season of frosted window panes and crackling fires, when the blast howls through the black ash-trees of our avenue and the drifting snow-storm chokes up the wood-paths and fills the highway from stone-wall to stone-wall. In the spring and summer time all sombre thoughts should follow the winter northward with the sombre and thoughtful crows. The old, paradisiacal economy of life is again in force; we live, not to think, nor to labor, but for the simple end of being happy; nothing, for the present hour, is worthy of man's infinite capacity, save to imbibe the warm smile of heaven, and sympathize with the reviving earth.

The present Spring comes onward with fleeter footsteps, because Winter lingered so unconscionably long, that, with her best diligence, she can hardly retrieve half the allotted period of her reign. It is but a fortnight, since I stood on the brink of our swollen river, and beheld the accumulated ice of four frozen months go down the stream. Except in streaks here and there upon the hillsides, the whole visible universe was then covered with deep snow, the nethermost layer of which had been deposited by an early December storm. It was a sight to make the beholder torpid, in the impossibility of imagining how this vast white napkin was to be removed from the face of the corpselike world, in less time than had been required to spread it there. But who can estimate the power of gentle influences, whether amid material desolation, or the moral winter of man's heart! There have been no tempestuous rains,—even, no sultry days,—but a constant breath of southern winds, with now a day of kindly sunshine, and now a no less kindly mist, or a soft descent of showers, in which a smile and a blessing seemed to have been steeped. The snow has vanished as if by magic; whatever heaps may be hidden in the woods and deep gorges of the hills, only two solitary specks remain in the landscape; and those I shall almost regret to miss when to-morrow I look for them in vain. Never before, methinks, has spring pressed so closely on the footsteps of retreating winter. Along the roadside the green blades of grass have sprouted on the very edge of the snowdrifts. The pastures and mowing fields have not yet assumed a general

aspect of verdure; but neither have they the cheerless brown tint which they wear in later autumn when vegetation has entirely ceased; there is now a faint shadow of life, gradually brightening into the warm reality. Some tracts in a happy exposure,—as, for instance, yonder southwestern slope of an orchard, in front of that old red farmhouse beyond the river,—such patches of land already wear a beautiful and tender green, to which no future luxuriance can add a charm. It looks unreal; a prophecy, a hope, a transitory effect of some peculiar light, which will vanish with the slightest motion of the eye. But beauty is never a delusion; not these verdant tracts, but the dark and barren landscape all around them, is a shadow and a dream. Each moment wins some portion of the earth from death to life; a sudden gleam of verdure brightens along the sunny slope of a bank which an instant ago was brown and bare. You look again, and behold an apparition of green grass!

The lilac-shrubs under my study window are likewise almost in leaf; in two or three days more I may put forth my hand and pluck the topmost bough in its freshest green. These lilacs are very aged, and have lost the luxuriant foliage of their prime. The heart, or the judgment, or the moral sense, or the taste is dissatisfied with their present aspect. Old age is not venerable when it embodies itself in lilacs, rosebushes, or any other ornamental shrub; it seems as if such plants, as they grow only for beauty, ought to flourish always in immortal youth, or, at least, to die before their sad decrepitude. Trees of beauty are trees of paradise, and therefore not subject to decay by their original nature, though they have lost that precious birthright by being transplanted to an earthly soil. There is a kind of ludicrous unfitness in the idea of a time-stricken and grandfatherly lilac bush. The analogy holds good in human life. Persons who can only be graceful and ornamental—who can give the world nothing but flowers—should die young, and never be seen with gray hair and wrinkles, any more than the flower shrubs with mossy bark and blighted foliage, like the lilacs under my window. Not that beauty is worthy of less than immortality—no; the beautiful should live forever—and thence, perhaps, the sense of impropriety, when we see it triumphed over by time. Apple-trees, on the other hand, grow old without reproach. Let them live as long as they may, and contort themselves into whatever perversity of shape they please, and deck their withered limbs with a springtime gaudiness of pink-blossoms; still they are respectable, even if they afford us only an apple or two in a season. Those few apples—or, at all events, the remembrance of apples in by-gone years—are the atonement which utilitarianism inexorably demands for the privilege of lengthened life. Human flower shrubs, if they will grow old on earth, should, besides their

lovely blossoms, bear some kind of fruit that will satisfy earthly appetites, else neither man nor the decorum of Nature will deem it fit that the moss should gather on them.

One of the first things that strikes the attention when the white sheet of winter is withdrawn is the neglect and disarray that lay hidden beneath it. Nature is not cleanly, according to our prejudices. The beauty of preceding years, now transformed to brown and blighted deformity, obstructs the brightening loveliness of the present hour. Our avenue is strewn with the whole crop of autumn's withered leaves. There are quantities of decayed branches which one tempest after another has flung down, black and rotten, and one or two with the ruin of a bird's nest clinging to them. In the garden are the dried bean-vines, the brown stalks of the asparagus bed, and melancholy old cabbages which were frozen into the soil before their unthrifty cultivator could find time to gather them. How invariably, throughout all the forms of life, do we find these intermingled memorials of death! On the soil of thought and in the garden of the heart, as well as in the sensual world, lie withered leaves—the ideas and feelings that we have done with. There is no wind strong enough to sweep them away; infinite space will not garner them from our sight. What mean they? Why may we not be permitted to live and enjoy, as if this were the first life, and our own the primal enjoyment, instead of treading always on these dry bones and mouldering relics, from the aged accumulation of which springs all that now appears so young and new? Sweet must have been the springtime of Eden, when no earlier year had strewn its decay upon the virgin turf and no former experience had ripened into summer and faded into autumn in the hearts of its inhabitants! That was a world worth living in! O, thou murmurer, it is out of the very wantonness of such a life that thou feignest these idle lamentations! There is no decay. Each human soul is the first created inhabitant of its own Eden. We dwell in an old moss-covered mansion, and tread in the worn footprints of the past, and have a gray clergyman's ghost for our daily and nightly inmate; yet all these outward circumstances are made less than visionary by the renewing power of the spirit. Should the spirit ever lose this power—should the withered leaves, and the rotten branches, and the moss-covered house, and the ghost of the gray past ever become its realities, and the verdure and the freshness merely its faint dream—then let it pray to be released from earth. It will need the air of heaven to revive its pristine energies.

What an unlooked-for flight was this, from our shadowy avenue of black ash and balm of Gilead trees into the infinite! Now we have our feet again upon the turf. Nowhere does the grass spring up so industriously as in

this homely yard, along the base of the stone wall, and in the sheltered nooks of the buildings, and especially around the southern doorstep; a locality which seems particularly favorable to its growth; for it is already tall enough to bend over and wave in the wind. I observe that several weeds— and, most frequently, a plant that stains the fingers with its yellow juice—have survived and retained their freshness and sap throughout the winter. One knows not how they have deserved such an exception from the common lot of their race. They are now the patriarchs of the departed year, and may preach mortality to the present generation of flowers and weeds.

Thank Providence for spring! The earth—and man himself, by sympathy with his birth-place—would be far other than we find them if life toiled wearily onward without this periodical infusion of the primal spirit. Will the world ever be so decayed, that spring may not renew its greenness? Can man be so dismally age-stricken that no faintest sunshine of his youth may revisit him once a year? It is impossible. The moss on our time-worn mansion brightens into beauty; the good old pastor, who once dwelt here, renewed his prime, regained his boyhood, in the genial breezes of his ninetieth spring. Alas for the worn and heavy soul, if, whether in youth or age, it have outlived its privilege of springtime sprightliness! From such a soul the world must hope no reformation of its evil—no sympathy with the lofty faith and gallant struggles of those who contend in its behalf. Summer works in the present, and thinks not of the future; Autumn is a rich conservative; Winter has utterly lost its faith, and clings tremulously to the remembrance of what has been; but Spring, with its outgushing life, is the true type of the movement!

——— Hawthorne, condensed (and birds
possibly I have forgotten)



“A well-bred French or English woman always chooses her most sober and unnoticeable dress in which to say her prayers in public, while an American puts on her newest robe and gayest bonnet in which to appear at church. The holiest day of the sacred calender, Easter Sunday, would lose all its significance in the mind of many of our women if unassociated with the inauguration of the spring fashions.” — Lydia E. White, *Success in Society: A Manual of Good Manners, Social Etiquette, Rules of Behavior at Home and Abroad, On the Street, At Public Gatherings, Calls, Conversation, Etc.*, 1888

“This flower, more frequently mentioned by the older poets than perhaps any other native plant, blooms in rather moist woods and thickets in March—its growth being rapid, and duration short. It waves in rich profusion in marshy spots on the borders of some of the lakes of Westmoreland.” — headnote to the next poem, *The Language and Poetry of Flowers*, 1800

To Daffodills

Faire Daffodills, we weep to see
 You haste away so soone;
As yet the early rising sun
 Has not attain'd his noone.
 Stay, stay,
 Until the hasting day
 Has run
 But to the even-song;
And, having pray'd together, we
 Will go with you along.

We have short time to stay, as you,
 We have as short a spring;
As quick a growth to meet decay,
 As you, or any thing.
 We die
 As your hours doe, and drie
 Away,
 Like to the summer's raine;
Or as the pearles of morning's dew,
 Ne'er to be found againe.

— Robert Herrick



on teaching Robert Herrick's to daffodils: a spring poem

you die quickly.
so do we!
at least there's this sweet poignancy!
find the vehicle and the tenor in this simile.

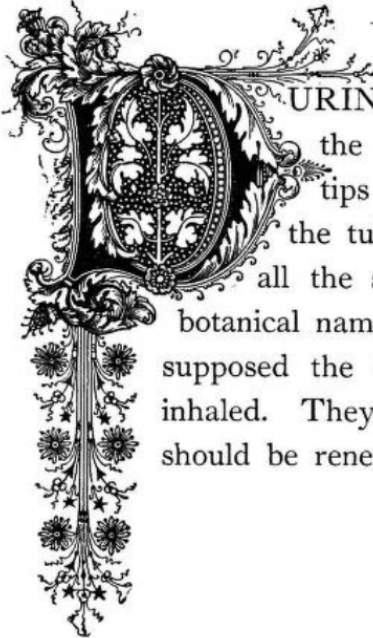
— Jane Kundert



Quine's logical zen: "If you help none who help themselves, you do not help yourself."

Daffodil.

Narcissus pseudo-narcissus. NATURAL ORDER: *Amaryllidaceæ*—*Amaryllis* Family.



URING the early spring, as soon as the frost begins to leave the ground, among the first green things to appear are the tips of the tapering leaves of this plant, in company with the tulips, hyacinths and other early flowering bulbs. Nearly all the species of the *Narcissus* produce yellow flowers. The botanical name is derived from the Greek word *narke*, stupor, as it is supposed the odor of some of them possess soporific influence when inhaled. They require a more than ordinarily rich soil, and the bulbs should be renewed when they begin to deteriorate through age.

— from *The Floral Kingdom*, 1877



Touchstones: The Hidden Springs of Poetry

To imagine is to misinterpret.... The meaning of a poem can only be another poem. This is not a tautology, not even a deep tautology, since the two poems are not the same poem, any more than two lives can be the same life. The issue is true history or rather the true use of it, rather than the abuse of it, both in Nietzsche's sense. True poetic history is the story of how poets as poets have suffered other poets, just as any true biography is the story of how anyone suffered his own family—or his own displacement of family into lovers and friends.

Summary—Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem. A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety.... There are no interpretations but only misinterpretations, and so all criticism is prose poetry.

Critics are more or less valuable than other critics only (precisely) as poets are more or less valuable than other poets. For just as a poet must be found by the opening in a precursor poet, so must the critic....

When we say that the meaning of a poem can only be another poem, we may mean a range of poems:

The precursor poem or poems.

The poem we write as our reading.
A rival poem, son or grandson of the same precursor.
A poem that never got written—that is—
the poem that should have been written by the poet in question.
A composite poem, made up of these in some combination....

Criticism is the discourse of the deep tautology—of the solipsist who knows that what he means is right, and yet that what he says is wrong. Criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem.

——— Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, Interchapter, 1973

Bloom wants to mean in this passage something impossible: he wants to turn poetry into achievements that cannot be understood *alone and by themselves*, but that only point away from themselves toward what went into, and came out of, those achievements. From the point of view of common sense, this doesn't make sense, since it seems to suggest that we can't read poems—that when we're reading *this* poem, we're actually reading *other* poems, though if we tried to specify, we'd be just as wrong about what other poems, since those poems too are other poems. Poems are holes, and we simply ricochet electrically between them.

In a sense, that's what Bloom wants us to do. As he also says in the little manifesto of his "interchapter," "We reduce—if at all—to another poem." This rhetoric, though, makes it seem like we need to deny that poems are about anything else—say, anything in the world that prompted it. This seems needlessly reductive and eliminates a lot of why people might read poetry. It reproduces the same kind of textual narcissism that he wants to awaken us from. There might be a handful of poems that are only about other poems, but most of them seem like they're about a lot of other things. To Bloom's metaphysical rhetoric here we should ask: Why does he feel he needs to reduce in this direction? Or in his terms, what are his parent poems here? What is *he* ricocheting away from?

The answer is "New Criticism," but that's a historiographical direction with less interest than what we can do with Bloom. What Bloom felt the need to remind us was that poetry *interacts* with other poetry. But since *everything*, in the metaphysical sense that Bloom needs to construe it (following Emerson), *is poetry*, we can see that Bloom's real goal is anti-reductive, and the reminder is that practical criticism is, in the pungent terms of his final sentence, the art of knowing the hidden roads in and out of a poem. Poems are anthologies of human striving, built from lost lumber.

Behind Bloom's stance in *The Anxiety of Influence* is the least New-Critical thing T. S. Eliot wrote in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens

simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it.” A poem, as a poem, must interact with the tradition we call “poetry.” If it does not, we should wonder why we’re calling it poetry, and not some other genre of writing, like social commentary, autobiography, political polemic, etc. Bloom’s philippics (and John Hollander’s for that matter) against contemporary poetry for being mainly those three things, and not good poetry, are mainly a sidetrack, though, since they implicitly reduce poetry to a particular tradition among traditions, abdicating the lofty Emersonian stance that generated their interactional insight. So how do we make use of Bloom’s sense of poetry?

First, identify poetry with trope—“trope” means “turn,” and this definition makes sense of Bloom’s idea that a poem qua poem always turns you away from it to something else. Second, understand that tropes flatten themselves into *topoi*, or themes, when used repeatedly to mean something else. Use a trope too often to mean the same other thing, and it will come to simply mean that other thing. That’s how a trope dies, like the dead metaphors “the foot of the mountain” or “mouth of the river.” A poem, then, refreshes a tradition when it turns a reduced theme back into a trope. That means to understand what a poem is doing one must look to how the poem revises tradition, *how a poem differs in its use from other uses of the theme*.

Does every instance of a daffodil mean “deceitful hope”? every lilac “forsaken”? every spring “rebirth”? Of course not; sometimes things just happen to happen in April. But sometimes they do mean those things. How do you know? The same way you figure out anything that is opaque—by testing out hypotheses about what the given instance is engaging with, by measuring the ratios between one instance and another instance you turn to. Reading poetry deeply, like all deep understanding, requires familiarity with phylogenetic and ontogenetic development, with the anthropology of human cultures and an individual flowering within them. Becoming familiar with more and more things fertilizes our experience of the world, no less than poetry.



“ANXIETY—is a symptom inseparable from the love-sick. ‘*I am under the most intense anxiety,*’ is a phrase, of course, with which one seeks to give a pretended passion all the colors of truth; for a real one never goes without it. The loyal subjects to the empire of love never pay their tribute of anxiety. Sometimes it consists in the fear of not triumphing openly over a rival; sometimes in the uncertainty of gaining one’s point. The Fair guard themselves against indiscretion; they endeavor to snatch a heart from their best female friend; they want to keep a train of lovers or augment it without losing any to discontent; others are busied in preserving a reputation to which they have no right. All these aims are not without their respective anxieties for their success; and yet these anxieties are preferable with them to a dull insipid state of indifference, which composes to them a *frightful void*.” — *Yankee Doodle*, vol 2, 1847

A Backward Spring

The trees are afraid to put forth buds,
And there is timidity in the grass;
The plots lie gray where gouged by spuds,
And whether next week will pass
Free of sly sour winds is the fret of each bush
Of barberry waiting to bloom

Yet the snowdrop's face betrays no gloom,
And the primrose pants in its heedless push,
Though the myrtle asks if it's worth the fight
This year with frost and time
To venture one more time
On delicate leaves and buttons of white
From the selfsame bough as at last year's prime,
And never to ruminate on or remember
What happened to it in mid-December.

— Thomas Hardy



Song of a Second April

April this year, not otherwise
Than April of a year ago,
Is full of whispers, full of sighs,
Of dazzling mud and dingy snow;
Hepaticas that pleased you so
And here again, and butterflies.

There rings a hammering all day,
And shingles lie about the doors;
In orchards near and far away
The grey wood-pecker taps and bores;
The men are merry at their chores,
And children earnest at their play.

The larger streams run still and deep,
Noisy and swift the small brooks run
Among the mullein stalks the sheep
Go up the hillside in the sun,
Pensively,—only you are gone,
You that alone I cared to keep.

— Millay



A Light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period —
When March is scarcely here

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.

It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you.

Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay —

A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament.

— Dickinson



ὕλη, *hyle* is the word we derive for physical *matter*, but is also the same word Aristotle used to talk about *subject matter*. It originally meant *a wood, forest*, and from thence *wood cut down*, and *lumber*, the stuff of which a thing is made.

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

— Frost



Lines Written in Early Spring

I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,
Their thoughts I cannot measure: –
But the least motion which they made,
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?

— Wordsworth



The Enkindled Spring

This spring as it comes bursts up in bonfires green,
Wild puffing of green-fire trees, and flame-green bushes,
Thorn-blossom lifting in wreaths of smoke between
Where the wood fumes up, and the flickering, watery rushes.

I am amazed at this spring, this conflagration
Of green fires lit on the soil of earth, this blaze
Of growing, these smoke-puffs that puff in wild gyration,
Faces of people blowing across my gaze!

And I, what sort of fire am I among
This conflagration of spring? the gap of it all – !
Not even palish smoke like the rest of the throng.
Less than the wind that runs to the flamy call!

— D. H. Lawrence

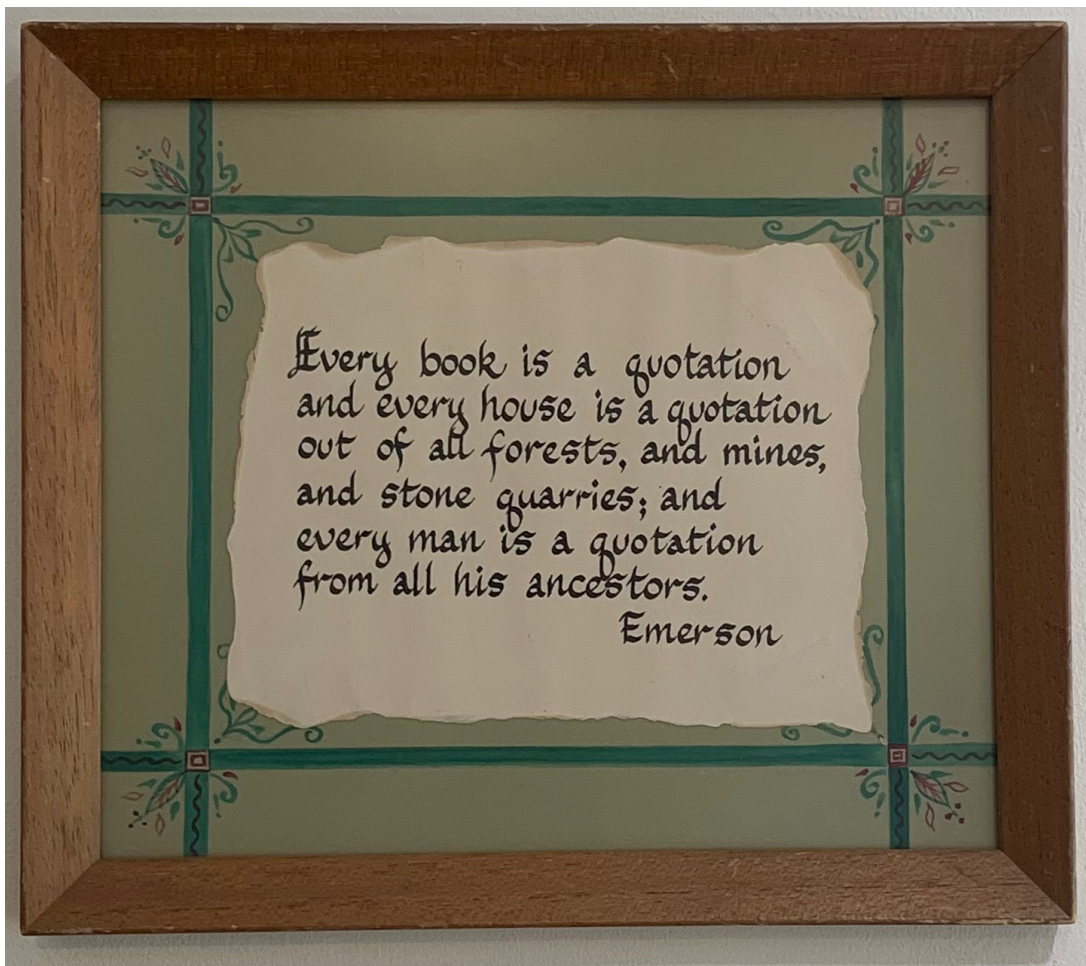


“COWSLIP HALL is now open for the season. This noble establishment is to the Vaccine race, what the Astor House is to humanity. Cowslip Hall contains accomodations for over two thousand cows. The apartments are fitted up in the most approved and comfortable manner; meals will be in all cases sent up, and no cow need ever set her foot for any necessary outside her own room. The cusine will consist of grain for the most part, deprived of those deleterious and spirituous portions that exert so baleful an influence over such numbers of the race. At certain times a small handful of hay will be sent up for those who indulge in the habit of chewing the cud. Three times a day, hot swill is propelled by a gigantic steam engine to every cow's room on the premises. How different this warm and comforting, nay, even exhilarating drink is from the cold and harsh juice of the grass. How different to be sheltered in Cowslip Hall's snug apartments from exposure to the storms in the open field. Benevolent cows may reflect that a dose of the liquid they contribute to furnish—sacrilege to call it milk—may be instrumental in restoring an infant to the mother—earth. The same cerulean nectar, joined with the perfume of Cowslip Hall may tend materially to shorten the stay of many a fellow creature, as Burns would say, men women and children in the disagreeable purlieus of a city. Undertakers and those interested in Cemetery Stock are desired to use their influence in behalf of this great charitable institution.” — *Yankee Doodle*, vol 2, 1847

The spring flood brings us more than high adventure; it brings likewise an unpredictable miscellany of floatable objects pilfered from upriver farms. An old board stranded on our meadow has, to us, twice the value of the same piece new from the lumberyard. Each old board has its own individual history, always unknown, but always to some degree guessable from the kind of wood, its dimensions, its nails, screws, or paint, its finish or the lack of it, its wear or decay. One can even guess, from the abrasion of its edges and ends on sandbars, how many floods have carried it in years past.

Our lumber pile, recruited entirely from the river, is thus not only a collection of personalities, but an anthology of human strivings in upriver farms and forests. The autobiography of an old board is a kind of literature not yet taught on campuses, but any riverbank farm is a library where he who hammers or saws may read at will. Come high water, there is always an accession of new books.

——— Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*



Editor's Table, May 2024

I keep a number of anthologies of poetry around me at all times, for obvious reasons, but Millay is one of the few poets I have kept consistently on the table since I began putting these issues together at the beginning of the year. I really liked teaching “What lips my lips have kissed,” which was in the anthology I used, but besides recognizing the first line of the poem—why? no clue, though I surmise it’s like hearing a Led Zeppelin song ostensibly for the first time and somehow recognizing the riff—I had no experience with Millay. I think it was after that I read David Bromwich’s introduction to his *American Sonnets*, which praises her as a rare talent at the sonnet. I trust Bromwich, so it was probably those two things that prompted me to pick up a used copy of *The Selected Poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, edited by Nancy Milford for *The Modern Library*, which is what I have on the table.

I only highlight this edition because it was a great find for me—I’m a completionist, so “selected poetry” editions are my least favorite, but this one is cool. I don’t like having shards of a person’s career flicked at me without being able to see what else was going on. Perhaps ironic given my love of anthologies, but when a writer finds me, I want to be able to go all in on them. And Milford’s edition collects the entirety of her earliest poetry—the first three books and a handful of sonnets from magazines—that made her initial reputation and earned her a Pulitzer in 1923 at the age of 31. Every time I dip into Millay, I come away enamored. No doubt it is partly because she operates in recognizable generic forms, as does Frost, and unlike nearly everyone worth reading in the 20th century, but even so.

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Some excellent news for philosophy regarding its insularity. Tamsin Shaw, a trained philosopher, has been writing about torture and the surveillance state for some years for the *New York Review of Books*, and she has another one, “Ethical Espionage,” in the Feb. 8 issue. “Though it hasn’t yet reached the public arena, a literature on the ethics of intelligence gathering has been burgeoning in the academic field of intelligence studies and now in philosophy departments as well. Cécile Fabre’s *Spying Through a Glass Darkly: The Ethics of Espionage and Counter-Intelligence* will undoubtedly open up new avenues of investigation so that others can branch out from the longer-standing philosophical concern with just war

theory.” Just-war theory and human-rights theory appear to be still solid subfields in American political philosophy, and while they can become arid and metaphysical (what can't in the hands of a philosopher?), I do think those are useful umbrellas for testing our moral intuitions about justice and the good against the various historical horrors that man has made of man.

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Speaking of philosophers, *The New Yorker* on April 8 has a useful review by Leslie Jamison of the philosopher, Kate Abramson's *On Gaslighting*. It has some good contextual matter, historical and otherwise. “In 2022, it was Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year, on the basis of a seventeen-hundred-and-forty-percent increase in searches for the term.” Crazy! Er, by which I mean, I believe it. “The popularity of the term testifies to a widespread hunger to name a certain kind of harm.” Just like *microaggression*, which also names something widely felt just below the surface, it can become so widespread as to stretch its utility, which the essay-review explores. Just because someone disagrees with you doesn't mean they're gaslighting you. Considering how divergent some of our communities are in the reality they're in touch with and have in common, I have to imagine an upswing in conflating disagreement and gaslighting. Even so, Jamison opens with a horrifying story she picks up while writing the piece of a woman whose first real boyfriend in college liked “rough sex,” telling her “This is how everyone has sex.” Fucking gross. She's now a social worker at a university campus: “Her current job gives her the chance to offer college students the language and the knowledge that she didn't have at their age. ‘I love consent education,’ she told me. ‘I wish someone had told me it was O.K. to say no.’ But she also sees the word ‘gaslighting’ as being used so broadly that it has begun to lose its meaning. ‘It's not just disagreement,’ she said. It's something much more invasive: the gaslighter ‘scoops out what you know to be true and replaces it with something else.’” Abramson says that “agreement isn't the endpoint of successful gaslighting.” Rather, “Gaslighters aim to fundamentally undermine their targets as deliberators and moral agents.” I think the quintessential gaslighting narrative is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

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One last news item on philosophers: Judith Butler is apparently having her day in the sun! I doubt even now I would say I am a fan, but hearing her on *every podcast I listen to* over the last month has changed my feelings about her. My limited exposure to her prose confirmed to me her broad reputation for being needlessly difficult and turgid in her writing. However, in these interviews—including on *Wait, Wait Don't Tell Me...*, which is about as lightweight as they come—she is warm, personable, and clear. It kind of melted away what were really relatively unfair feelings about her. She's not one of "my people," someone I look to for intellectual growth, but that's okay. I have had over the years a number of friends who count her or at least *Gender Trouble* as an inspiration, and the book is undoubtedly influential in its definition of gender as performative. So while I had come to the idea untroubled from a number of other directions (guess! guess!), I have to appreciate everyone's own ontogenetic growth (I promise, that is the last time, probably ever, you will see me use that term)—everyone has and deserves their own gods.

So two cheers for Judith Butler! And, sadly, one jeer for Katha Pollitt, a feminist writer I have far warmer and stronger feelings about. She has been writing a column for *The Nation* for years and years, and seems to me a forceful advocate of a radical yet down-to-earth feminism. But she was on the magazine's pod, *Start Making Sense*, May 1 and started her commentary on Butler's new book she's making the rounds for, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*, with needless and dumb animus. There's a weird, flyaway comment about Butler now identifying as nonbinary—"one only wonders why this didn't occur to her before," i.e. because she popularized it as performative, which, fair enough, yet are we really going to wonder about each person's personal journey of self-discovery?—but mainly it's the digs at Butler for gender performativity being "not exactly an original idea of Butler's," as the host, Jon Weiner says. Weiner sets Pollitt up with, "So how far back do we find the idea that femininity is not part of nature?" and Pollitt says, "Well, see, this is what is so infuriating. This is an old feminist idea put forward by dozens of second-wave feminists. And by John Stuart Mill in 1869, who wrote, 'What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing.' So this is not a new idea. And yet she gets credit for it, which is very annoying." Yeah, but I seriously doubt Butler has ever *taken credit* for the basic idea of the social-constructed nature of human nature. Butler is a legitimately well-read philosopher—she knows where her ideas have come from. She can't help that dumb freshmen read her in their first ever gender studies class and have their eyes thankfully opened, and then go on to give her all the kudos because young Americans are woefully unprepared in

intellectual history. Hey, I love it when my own heroes get play (double-woot to Mill!), and I can see that Pollitt's annoyance stems from her identification with those second-wavers, and making sure the huge part of that iceberg gets its just recognition, but just because her new book is, ha, perhaps still as turgid as the ones before (Butler gets style-checked a number of times), that doesn't mean she's some semi-academic popularizer like Steven Pinker (BOOM!). She's as heavyweight as they come.

Ezra Klein had an interesting interview with the editor, Adam Moss, on April 23. In the context of our ability, through social media, to get people's reactions quickly and so triangulate ourselves to an audience, Klein says, "one thing that I think held in *New York Magazine* and has held since you've left is it feels like it is for somebody, not decided by everybody. And I've started to understand that it's more radical and more necessary. But it's also a tremendous act of faith in yourself against the whole world, right? How do you come to trust yourself, your reaction, as valid?" The Emersonian question, and Moss replies, "It's like trusting yourself in any context, which is that you get a little courageous and you venture out and you try something." And a little later Klein asks what Moss looks for when hiring writers, and Moss says, "I listen for confidence, but not too much confidence." Be bold, be bold, be bold—but not *too* bold.

And speaking of listening, the same episode of *Start Making Sense* had on a political strategist who works on rural outreach, Anthony Flaccavento. He had this to say: "Our study [of "candidates running in rural America who 'overperformed'"] kind of reinforce what other groups who've been doing what some folks called 'deep canvassing' have been advocating for quite some time now, which is to say that the first step after the hello, the first words out of your mouth is, 'what are the issues on your mind?' or 'what do you care about?' So it's really a listening posture." College-student volunteers, often with a future in activism on their mind, make up a big resource for politicians, but Flaccavento said that, in general, those are not the people you want, I take it, because 1) they aren't from the community itself (which is a big part of deep canvassing) and 2) they are more likely to feel themselves "morally superior." And he says, "if you need to bring in volunteers [rather than the candidate doing the canvassing themselves],

young aspiring activists [from] college, great, but you must put them through a process so they understand and they come to people at the door in the same way the candidate would because then they can be helpful to you. If they come like most campaigns train activists to come, they will hurt you more than help you.”

But thinking more broadly, what could be better than training young college students—of course, really all people—to listen? And especially right now, when college students are themselves a kind of constituent community, and one known for feeling morally superior and being out of touch, what could be better than sending them out to *listen*, to grow through contact with other voices, *and* letting those others grow by coming into contact with college students. The mixing of communities, and each seeing how the other thinks and how they are regular people, is a long-term benefit to the American polis.



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